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EVALUATION OF HUMAN CREATURES IN ELIZABETHAN PROSE FICTION

The primary objective of this research is to investigate the distinctive aspects of the evaluation of human beings as creatures in prose fiction of the Elizabethan period (1558–1603) in the history of English literature. The emergence of imaginative prose, originally written in the English language in the second half of the Tudor era, represents a significant literary development of that time. This advancement coincided with the ongoing religious Reformation, potentially impacting the perception and interpretation of traditional religious concepts.

To achieve the stated aim, a corpus of Elizabethan prose fiction was compiled, and the occurrences of the word “creature” with modifying adjectives in pre- and postpositions within the corpus texts were examined. Distributional and semantic analyses of the usage of the word creature in conjunction with modifying adjectives allowed us to ascertain the referential scope of the word “creature”, classifying its referents into a male-creature, female-creature, and a human being-creature, to determine the adjectives employed by Renaissance authors to evaluate human creatures positively or negatively.

The research findings demonstrated that Elizabethan authors portrayed human creatures multifacetedly, differing in their positive and negative evaluations. These findings suggest diverse influences on the interpretation of the concept “creature” in the literary works of the Elizabethan period, i.e., traditional religious and biblical views were interwoven with ideas from classical and Renaissance continental literature, and both contributed to the miscellaneous understanding and evaluation of human creatures.

Keywords: prose fiction, Elizabethan period, creature, modifiers, evaluation.

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ОЦІНЮВАННЯ ЛЮДЕЙ ЯК ІСТОТИ В ЄЛИЗАВЕТСЬКІЙ ПРОЗІ

Основною метою цього дослідження є вивчення особливостей оцінки людини як істоти в художній прозі елізаветинського періоду (1558–1603) в історії англійської літератури. Поява самобутньої художньої прози, написаної англійською мовою в другій половині епохи Тюдорів, є значним розвитком літературного середовища тієї епохи. Цей прогрес збігся з триваючою релігійною Реформацією, яка могла потенційно вплинути на сприйняття традиційних релігійних концепцій та їх інтерпретації.

Для досягнення поставленої мети дослідження було складено корпус творів елізаветинської художньої прози та проаналізовано використання слова «creature» з прикметниками в пре- та постпозиціях у текстах корпусу. Дистрибутивно-семантичний аналіз вживання слова істота в сполученні з прикметниками дозволив з'ясувати референційний обсяг слова «creature» та виокремити male-creature, female-creature, human being-creature; а також визначити прикметники, які вживалися авторами епохи Відродження для позитивного чи негативного оцінювання людських істот.

Результати дослідження показали, що автори елізаветинської епохи багатогранно зображували людину як істоту, різнячись в її позитивних і негативних оцінках. Це може бути свідченням різних впливів на тлумачення поняття «creature» в літературних творах того періоду – традиційні релігійні погляди на це поняття перепліталися з ідеями класичної та ренесансної континентальної літератури, сприяючи багатоманітному розумінню та оцінюванню людських творів.

Ключові слова: художня проза, елізаветинська доба, істота, модифікатори, оцінка.

Introduction. The traditional religious and biblical notion of a *creature* refers to everything that was created by the divine power of God: “A creature is any contingent substance that has its ultimate cause in God” (Mullins, 2022: 4). *The Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* explains the word *creature*, as “something having life, either animal or human” (Brand et al., 2015: 364).

According to the OED, the word *creature* appeared in Middle English circa 1300 as a borrowing from French, dating back to post-classical Latin *creatura* with the meaning “anything created”, although there were equivalents in Old English: *gesceaft* and *wight* (OED). The definition of the word *creature* in the OED includes a range of senses, making its general conceptual meaning ambiguous, allowing various interpretations and readings. Its polysemy and indeterminacy, wide scope of potential referents make the word *creature* a fascinating object of research. In the paper, we examine only one aspect of this word’s meaning: when it denotes a human being.

The aim of this article is to examine the peculiarities of human creatures' evaluation in Elizabethan prose fiction. This will allow us to see whether there is a marked tendency in the evaluation of human creatures in the literary works of that period and how this correlates with the religious and biblical understanding of this notion.

The topicality of our work lies in its anthropocentrism since a human being and his or her beliefs are at the centre of our research. The study touches upon the intimate relationship of a human being with religious notions, the way they are perceived and evaluated in the creative imagination, and how they are presented to the public in literary works. Aiming at researching the evaluation of human creatures in Elizabethan prose fiction, we put our research along with those that tackle always current but unresolvable issues of human existence.

The topic we have chosen for our research, which focuses on the use and evaluation of *creatures* in Elizabethan prose fiction, remains unexplored in existing literature. It contributes to a deeper understanding of the conceptual meaning of the notion “*creature*” itself and its portrayal within the discourse of the prose fiction of that period. We believe that the novelty of this genre for Elizabethan literature, the variety of its forms, and its distinctive blending of prose writing with poetry and songs gave authors a lot of opportunities and artistic freedom to experiment with classical and biblical stories, imitating and reproducing them. In the authors' creative imagination, these stories became fertile ground for sprouting *creatures'* multiple understandings and literary interpretations.

Literature Review. The second half of the Tudor era, during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603) was the beginning of prose fiction written in the English language. This was the time of several significant milestones in the country's history, i.e., the English Renaissance, the religious Reformation, the growth of the print market, and the shaping of the early modern English language. Historically, these transformational events were occurring simultaneously or with very little time difference, often interrelated and mutually influencing one another. Undeniably, such important historical events had to have an impact on the literature that was created in the 16th century, preconditioning its growth, development, and change throughout the whole century. Starting with translations and imitations of Italian, French, Spanish or classical sources into English (see Baker, 1924; Lewis, 1954; Davis, 1969, and others), Elizabethan narratives made rapid and impressive progress towards the creation of genuinely unique narrative fiction, although scholars differ in opinion as to what narrative written in the English language was the first one. Walter R. Davis and Ernest A. Baker consider it to be George Gascoigne's *The Adventures of Master F. J.* (Baker, 1924: 29; Davis, 1969: 97). In their turn, William A. Ringler and Michael Flachmann called William Baldwin's story *A marvelous hystory intituled beware of cat* “the first English novel” (Ringler & Flachmann, 1988). At the same time, the narrative *The deceyte of women* written by an anonymous author, is listed as the first among the sources of prose fiction originally written in English in *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* (Watson et al., 1974: 2051–2055). With the purpose of examining the use of the word *creature* in Elizabethan prose fiction, we decided to use *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, considering it to be the most reliable and authoritative catalogue of literary works nowadays, thus leaving outside the scope of our research the differing opinions of literary historians and critics as to the first prose fiction work written in English.

The abundance of academic literature written in the 20th and 21st centuries on Elizabethan prose fiction (Barbour, 1993; Davis, 2015; Lewis, 1954; Maslen, 1997; Keymer, 2017; Shuger, 1997 and others) indicates its importance for the development of the novel genre. Interestingly, these works were not highly estimated at the beginning of the 20th by literary critics. For instance, Ernest A. Baker regarded Elizabethan narratives “obscure, slight and unsatisfactory affair” (Baker, 1924: 15), while Robert M. Lovett and Helen S. Hughes called them “entertaining experiments” that “did not attain to great heights” (Lovett and Hughes, 1932: 16).

However, scholars' views about these literary works have changed since then, and this literature is now widely studied and greatly appreciated. The change in perception reflects a growing recognition of their importance and contribution of Elizabethan narratives to the literary landscape. In our opinion, Robert W. Maslen, very aptly characterised modern attitudes towards Elizabethan prose fiction, calling it “witty, and daring, and innovative” that “marks out fiction as shifty, exploratory, perilous territory, which maintains (or fails to maintain) a precarious equilibrium between sustaining current orthodoxies and dallying with forbidden ideologies and novel notions; which refuses every kind of closure; which helps, in fact, to make prose fiction the unruly and disruptive medium it has remained ever since” (Maslen, 1997: 18).

Research methodology. To study how human creatures were evaluated by the Renaissance authors of the second half of Tudor period, we build a corpus of the prose fiction works written in that period, using *The New Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* as was mentioned above, applying several criteria to the sources given in the catalogue, specifically: “written in the Elizabethan period”, “initially written in English”, “not a straightforward translation”, and “not a compilation from other sources”. The electronic copies of the original printed texts of the Elizabethan narratives were retrieved from two digital archives: Historical Texts (historicaltexts.jisc.ac.uk) and ProQuest ExLibris (www.proquest.com). In such a way, we compiled a corpus of 86 Elizabethan prose fiction narratives (see Table 1).

Table 1.

List of Prose Fiction Works Used for The Study of Elizabethan Prose Fiction

Armin Robert. <i>Foole upon foole</i>	2	Johnson, Richard. <i>The nine worthies of London</i>	0
Averell, William. <i>A Dyall for dainty darlings</i>	9	– <i>The most famous history of the seaven champions of Christendome</i>	37
Baldwin, William <i>A marvelous hystory intituled beware of cat</i>	9	– <i>The most pleasant history of Tom a Lincolne</i>	5
B[orde], A[ndrew]. <i>Merie tales of the mad men of Gotan</i>	0	Lodge, Thomas. <i>An alarum against usurers</i>	5
Breton, Nicholas. <i>The miseris of Mavillia</i>	4	Kittowe, Robert. <i>Loves load-stare</i>	6
– <i>The strange fortunes of two excellent princes</i>	11	– <i>Rosalynde: Euphues golden legacie</i>	5
C., H. <i>The Forrest of fancy: pleasaunt histories</i>	6	– <i>The famous, true and historicall life of Robert second duke of Normandy</i>	5
C., W. <i>The Adventures of ladie Egeria</i>	5	– <i>Euphues shadow, the battaile of the sences</i>	5
C[hettle], H[enry]. <i>Kind-harts dreame</i>	3	– <i>The life and death of William Longbeard</i>	0

Dekker, Thomas. <i>The Wonderfull Yeare</i>	2	– <i>A Margarite of America</i>	3
Deloney, Thomas. <i>The Gentle Craft</i>	7	Lyly, John. <i>Euphues: the anatomy of wyt</i>	6
– <i>The pleasant history of John Winchcomb, in his younger yeares called</i>	4	– <i>Euphues and his England</i>	7
– <i>Thomas of Reading</i>	2	M.C. <i>The first part of the nature of women</i>	6
D[ickenson], J[ohn]. <i>Arisbas, Euphues amidst his slumbers</i>	4	– <i>The second part of the historie</i>	21
– <i>Greene in Concept</i>	3	M., Jo. <i>Philippe Venus</i>	0
– <i>Piers Plainnes seauen yeres prentiship</i>	3	Melbancke, Brian. <i>Philotimus. The warre betwixt nature and fortune</i>	8
Ford, Emanuel. <i>The most pleasant history of Ornatus and Artesia</i>	6	<i>Memorable conceits of diuers noble and famous personages of Christendome</i>	4
– <i>Parismus, the renoumed prince of Bohemia</i>	30	Middleton, Christopher. <i>The famous historie of chinon of England</i>	20
Fraunce, Abraham. <i>The third part of the Countesse of Pembrokes</i>	2	Munday, Anthony. <i>Zelauto: the fontaine of fame</i>	10
Gascoigne, George. <i>A pleasant discourse of the adventures of master F. J.</i>	8	Nashe, Thomas. <i>The vnfortunate traoueller. or, the life of Iacke Wilton</i>	2
– <i>The pleasant tale of Hemetes the hermite</i>	1	Parry, Robert. <i>Moderatus, the most delectable & famous historie of the blacke knight</i>	10
Gosson, Stephen. <i>The Ephemerides of Phialo</i>	7	Pettie, George. <i>A Petite pallace of Pettie his pleasure</i>	17
G.R. <i>The famous historie of albions queene</i>	3	Rich, Barnabe. <i>A right exelent and pleasaunt dialogue, betwene Mercury and an English souldier</i>	4
Grange, John. <i>The Golden Aphroditis</i>	5	Riche his farewell to militarie profession	8
Greene, Robert. <i>Mamilia: a mirroure or lookjng-glasse for the ladies of Englande. The second part of the triumph of Pallas</i>	16	The straunge and wonderfull adventures of Don Simonides	6
– <i>Arbasto: the anatomie of fortune</i>	6	The second tome of the travailes and adventures of Don Simonides	14
– <i>Gwydonius: the carde of fancie</i>	13	The Adventures of Brusanus, Prince of Hungaria	12
– <i>Morando the tritameron of love</i>	6	Robarts, Henry. <i>A Defiance to fortune</i>	14
– <i>The myrroure of modestie</i>	2	– <i>Pheander, the mayden knight</i>	20
– <i>Planetomachia</i>	10	– <i>Honours Conquest</i>	2
– <i>Euphues his censure to philautus</i>	1	– <i>Haigh for Devonshire</i>	0
– <i>Penelopes web</i>	0	Saker, Austen. <i>Narbonus. The Laberynth of Libertie</i>	20
– <i>Pandosto: the triumph of time</i>	3	Sidney, Sir Philip. <i>The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia</i>	32
– <i>Perimides the blacke-smith</i>	2	Tartlons newes out of purgatorie	5
– <i>Ciceronis Amor: tullies love</i>	6	The cobler of Caunterburie	3
<i>the Spanish masquerado</i>	1	The deceyte of women	0
– <i>Menaphon Camillas alarum to slumbering Euphues</i>	5	The heroicall adventures of the Knight of the sea	17
– <i>Greenes farewell to folly</i>	2	The thrie tales of the thrie priests	0
– <i>The black bookes messenger: the life and death of Ned Brown</i>	0	Tilney, Edmund. <i>Briefe and pleasant discourse of duties in marriage</i>	2
– <i>Greenes never too late</i>	6	Warner, William. <i>Pan his Syrinx</i>	9
– <i>Greenes mourning garnment</i>	5	Whetstone, George. <i>The rocke of regard</i>	3
– <i>Philomela</i>	5	– <i>An heptameron of ciuill discourses</i>	23
– <i>Greenes groats worth of wit</i>	2		
– <i>Greenes Orpharion</i>	7		

Following Susan Hunston and Geoff Thompson, we understand evaluation as “the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about” (Thompson and Hunston, 2000: 5). Out of the four parameters of evaluation, i.e., good / bad, certainty, expectedness, and importance, suggested by (Thompson and Hunston, 2000), the first one was chosen for the research as it directly entails a positive or negative attitude, assessment, opinion, judgement of the notion in question. The other parameters, although important for the concept of evaluation on the whole, are not so relevant to our research. Adjectival modifiers used in pre- and postpositions of the word *creature* in Elizabethan fiction texts were analysed as evaluative lexemes since they qualify the referent of a nominal expression. Although various parts of speech (e.g., nouns, quantifiers, phrases, clauses) can function as modifiers to nouns, evaluating and specifying their referents, adjectives are traditionally considered to be the most direct means of communicating evaluation since “most typically, adjectives describe qualities of people, things, and states of affairs” (Biber, 1999: 64). Grammarians differentiate between descriptive and classifying adjectives, where the former include evaluative/emotive ones (Biber, 1999: 508-509), however, we do not segregate adjectival modifiers in our study, believing that when describing a referent of the word *creature*, they at the same time evaluate it either explicitly or implicitly. In the study, we use the terms adjectives, adjectival modifiers, or modifiers on equal terms to designate lexemes that function as adjectives and are used to characterise the noun *creature*.

Research Findings and Discussion. The corpus analysis enabled us to ascertain the frequency of a *creature*’s occurrence in Elizabethan romances (423 instances) with reference to human beings and the specificity of evaluating the traditional biblical notion

designated by the word *creature*. A total of 390 adjectives were identified in the pre- and postpositions of the word “*creature*.” The figure below provides a visual representation of how these adjectives were used in relation to *human creatures*.

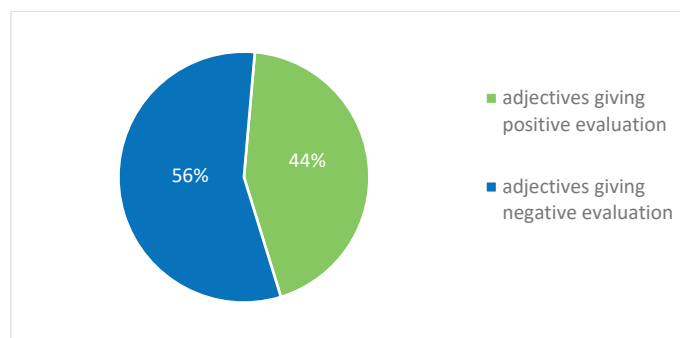


Figure 1. The Quantitate and Semantic Analysis of Adjectives Evaluating Human Creatures in Elizabethan Prose Fiction

The quantitative and semantic analyses of adjectives in conjunction with the word *creature* in the corpus texts show varying qualifications of the biblical notion signified by this word. It must be mentioned, however, that in many cases the analysed lexeme was modified by quantifiers (*all, every, other, no, etc.*), or was preceded only by articles, or used without them. On some occasions, this word had double or triple modification, e.g.: *a peeuiſh vnhappy creature; moſte filthie and lothſome creatures; poore, fhameleffe, and difobedient creature; a leane ſcraggenly, fleſh-confumed creature*. Therefore, there is no direct correlation between the frequency of the word *creature*'s occurrences and the quantity of its adjectival modification.

The most frequently used adjectives with the word *creature* are: *mortal* (36), *earthly* (35), *fair* (22), *reasonable* (22), *living* (19), *human* (17), *heavenly* (15), *poor* (9), *excellent* (8), *beautiful* (7), *miserable* (7), *divine* (6), *perfect* (6), *virtuous* (6), *cursed* (5), *loathsome* (5), *wicked* (5), *sweet* (5), *careless* (5), *comely* (5). These most commonly occurring adjectives are provided with modern spelling for clarity, but there were several spellings of the same words (e.g., *humane/humaine/humayne*), diacritic marks (e.g., *péereleffe, excellēt*), inconsistency of graphical representation of letters (e.g., *difreffed, vnhappy, heauenly*) in Elizabethan texts, which manifest the absence of standardised variants in early modern prose fiction. The range and number of adjectives characterising the word *creature* make it impossible to exemplify all of them, considering that a large proportion, namely 108 units (28%), appeared only once or twice in the corpus texts.

The noticeable influence of religion on the perception and understanding of the notion of a *creature* in Elizabethan fiction was a predictable outcome of the corpus analysis. In accordance with the biblical interpretation, the *creature* is shown as subordinate to the divine immortal being, often characterised as earthbound and perishable (*mortal, earthly, human, living*), e.g.:

IF it were méete for mortall creatures to complaine of their immortal creator [...] (Pettie, George. 1576. A Petite Pallace of Pettie his pleasure)

This Vranius, for his excellency, was deemed rather cæleſtiall, (as his name importeth) then any earthly creature [...] (Fraunce, Abraham. 1593. The Third Part of the Countesse: 6)

Such depreciation and lessening in estimation of human creatures in the analysed prose fiction texts is also highlighted by many other modifiers (*dying, decayed, terrestrial, worldly, old, cursed, forlorn, wicked* and others), which create a negative image of the *creature*.

In contrast to *creature*'s debasement, modifiers giving positive qualifications, among which *fair* and *heavenly* were most frequently used, promote an appealing image of the human *creature*, specifically females, e.g.:

[...] fuddenly in the midft of a clouen Rocke he eſpies fitting a companie of faire Creatures, whereof one (exceeding all lyke the Huntrefſe amidft the naked troupes of her attendant Nimphs) [...] (Middleton, Christopher. 1597. The Famous Historie of Chinon of England).

Rodento amafed at the fight of fuch a heauenly creature, ftood a long while aſtoniſhed at her excellent beautie [...] (Greene, Robert. 1587. Planetomachia).

The study findings indicate an uneven distribution of adjectives that attribute positive or negative evaluations to human creatures within the analysed corpus texts. A comprehensive overview of adjectives' allocation across three singled-out categories, *male-creatures, female-creatures, and human being-creatures*, is presented in the table below:

Table 2.

The Distribution of Adjectives Evaluating Human Creatures in Elizabethan Prose Fiction

	adjectives positively evaluating	adjectives negatively evaluating
a male-creature	14	51
a female-creature	105	43
a human being -creature	52	125

The decision to differentiate a separate category as “*human being-creatures*”, was necessitated by the frequent occurrence of the word *creature* in the corpus texts with reference to human beings collectively, without gender specification. For instance:

I remember Phialo, that Plato giueth hartie thanks to Nature, for making him rather a reaſonable creature, then a brute beaſt (Gosson, Stephen. 1579. The Ephemerides of Phialo).

As illustrated in Table 2, the corpus analysis of the evaluative adjectives employed to characterise *female-creatures* clearly show a tendency towards their positive evaluation (105 instances compared to 43). Renaissance authors used adjectival modifiers to describe women's physical attractiveness (e.g., *fair, excellent, beautiful, perfect, sweet, comely*), to praise their personal qualities (e.g., *good, kind, virtuous, reasonable*), and even to equate them to divine or celestial beings (e.g., *angelical, blessed, divine, heavenly*), like in the following example:

The king whiles the Pirate told his tale, kept his eye fill on the gentlewoman, whofe beautie he foūd fuch that he thought her fome heauenly creature fhrowded in fome mortall carcaffē (no author. 1591. *The Cofler of Caunterburie*).

While “[b]eauty is associated with women in the Bible but without detail what makes them beautiful” (Brand et al., 2015), women's elevation and likening to divine creatures in Elizabethan prose fiction challenge their traditionally subordinate role assigned to them in the biblical context. According to Paul Heger, “the narrative of the woman's creation, rather than that of the Fall, was the primary basis for woman's subordinate legal status, which developed into submissiveness to her husband, as implied in the Fall narrative (Heger, 2014: 25). The prevalence of positively qualifying adjectives in characterising *female-creatures*, in our opinion, can be attributed to the influence of classical and continental Renaissance literature, which celebrated and idolised the image of a woman (Passaro, 2005). Adjectives evaluating women negatively were varied (e.g., *wicked, cursed, forlorn, miserable, shameless*) but there are no marked tendencies in such characterisation.

The research reveals a prevalence of negative evaluation in two other categories: *male-creatures* and *human being-creature*. For example:

Gentleman (faid fhe) much it is againft my will to forbear any time the executing of my iuft reuēge vpon this naughtie creature, a man in nothing, but in deceauing women (Sidney, Philip. 1891. *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*).

Oh, vilde Creatures, of fuch cankred mindes, who could be fo hard hearted! (Breton, Nicholas. 1599. *The Miseries of Mavillia*)

In our opinion, the use of numerous negative adjectives with the noun *creature* in these categories reflects the traditional religious views on the human species as inferior in comparison with the divine creatures. The most frequently used modifiers to characterize men were *loathsome* and *miserable*, and when referring collectively to *human being-creatures*, modifiers emphasised people's mortality and belonging to the earth, as it was mentioned earlier.

Conclusions. The study of *human creature's* evaluation across the entire corpus of Elizabethan narratives has revealed a prevailing usage of negative adjectival modifiers used in conjunction with the lexeme *creature* (219 instances compared to 171). Notably, the most commonly used modifiers “*mortal*” and “*earthly*” create an image of human temporality and transience in comparison with divine immortal beings. However, the overall negative evaluation of *human creatures* in early modern prose fiction stands in contrast with the positive estimation of *female-creatures*.

The research findings show that the evaluation of *human creatures* in Elizabethan prose fiction is multifaceted. We may assume that such various perceptions and interpretations of the concept of a “*creature*” were due to diverse influences on the literary works of that period, where religious and biblical understandings were interwoven with ideas derived from classical and Renaissance continental literature. These varied influences contributed to the miscellaneous reading and evaluation of human creatures.

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